



Hayes: SEC must end cupcake games in Nov.

SPORTS, 1B

MCDONOUGH COUNTY

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Graduate students at Western Illinois University launch a campaign to promote vaccine education. PROVIDED BY VAXCONNECT

Western IL students tackling vaccine questions head-on

Abreanna Blose
AI-assisted reporter
USA TODAY NETWORK

A group of graduate students at Western Illinois University has launched a campaign to educate the public about vaccines and improve access for students and the surrounding community.

According to a community announcement, the student-led initiative, called VaxConnect, is coordinated through the Health Sciences Graduate Students Association and funded by a \$2,500 grant from the Illinois Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics. The Wesley Foundation, a faith-based organization on campus, is also supporting the project.

“There are still a lot of questions people have about vaccines,” Douglas Manganda, a public health graduate student and leader of the Vaccine Education Team, said. “We realized people didn’t

just need information. They needed trust and access.”

Four-part campaign strategy

According to the announcement, in December the VaxConnect Project will focus on four main components: peer education and outreach led by trained student advocates, “baby shower” events for pregnant students and student parents, digital storytelling campaigns across TikTok, Instagram and Facebook, and multilingual materials in Spanish, Bengali and several African languages to expand accessibility.

Abiola Ayodele, a broadcast journalist with more than five years of experience in news and feature reporting across major U.S. and European outlets, leads the Digital Storytelling Team. He emphasized that a strong media presence — across radio, television, print and online platforms — will be key to the campaign’s impact.

“Our goal is to meet people where they are — whether on campus, in the community, or through the media they engage with,” Ayodele said in the announcement.

Mirza Jahan, the media team lead, a social media enthusiast and current graduate assistant managing WIU’s Communication Department’s social media pages, noted the importance of accessible, accurate communication.

“We want to make vaccine information relatable, visual, and authentic through radio, television, print, and on-line storytelling that connects with real experiences and voices,” she said.

Meanwhile, Rachael Adebiyi and Mimi, co-leads of the Baby Shower Events Team, are focusing on outreach to student parents and expecting students.

“We want to create a supportive space where health meets community,” Adebiyi said. “It’s not just about the

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Want to help Toys for Tots?

Here’s how to donate for children in Macomb

Nida Tazeen
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USA TODAY NETWORK

The City of Macomb is teaming up with Toys for Tots of West Central Illinois to help local children in need this holiday season.

City Hall will serve as a drop-off location for new, unwrapped toys, according to a community announcement. Donations can be made during City Hall’s open hours, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday.

How to get involved

For those looking to get more involved, the Toys for Tots website offers information on other ways to donate, volunteer opportunities and how to request toys.

In-person registration for toy requests will be held from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. Nov. 25 at The Crossing, 1600 W. Jackson St. in Macomb. Those registering must bring an ID, proof of current address (if different from the ID) and proof of life for each child.

Important details

- Macomb City Hall is a drop-off location for Toys for Tots donations.
 - Donations can be made from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday.
 - In-person registration for toy requests is Nov. 25 at The Crossing in Macomb.
- This story was created by reporter Nida Tazeen, NTazeen@usatoday-co.com , with the assistance of Artificial Intelligence (AI). Journalists were involved in every step of the information gathering, review, editing and publishing process. Learn more at cm.usatoday.com/ethical-conduct .*

Aaron Willits resigns as football coach at Knox College

Nida Tazeen
AI-assisted reporter
USA TODAY NETWORK

Aaron Willits has resigned as head coach of the Knox College football team after five seasons, according to a community announcement.

Willits, a member of the Knox Class of 2008, led the program to a record of 16-32 overall and 14-30 in the Midwest Conference. He cited personal reasons for his decision.

“At this point in my life, priorities have shifted. With a professional change for my wife that we could not turn down, I am needed at home as a husband and father now more than I have up to this point in my life,” Willits shared. “Everything I have done since graduating high school has been impacted by my experience as a student-athlete and, now, as a professional at Knox College. Like my fellow alumni, my life has been changed by Knox. As I step down as head coach, I want to thank the college for sup-



Willits

porting me in our efforts to move the football program forward, and I look forward to continuing to grow the program as an alum.”

Willits’ impact on the program

Under Willits’ guidance, nine Prairie Fire players have earned a total of 12 all-conference honors, including first-teamers Charlie Gibbons (OL) in 2022 and Kaile Williams (QB) in 2023. No fewer than 40 others have garnered Academic All-Midwest Conference honors a combined 62 times, with this year’s honorees still to be named.

“We support Coach Willits, through this difficult decision, respect and admire his commitment to his family, and appreciate his continued dedication to Prairie Fire athletics and the entire Knox community,” shared President C. Andrew McGadney.

Hired in February 2021, Willits led the squad to its best record in 20 years in just his second season with the Prairie Fire going 5-5 overall with a 4-5 mark in league play. In 2024, Knox opened the season with

a victory in the Lincoln Bowl versus Eureka for the first time since 2017 as well.

“Coach Willits is not only a wonderful example of a Knox College alumnus, he also understands, appreciates and believes in Prairie Fire Athletics and Knox College more than most anyone I know,” stated Knox College Vice President and Director of Athletics Justin Newell. “He helped build the largest football rosters in college history, reconnected football alumni across decades, and served as a true Knox ambassador to the Galesburg community. His legacy will be felt for years to come.”

Willits’ coaching career

Willits began his coaching career at Knox following graduation. He served as recruiting coordinator for two years and coached the offensive line his first year and running backs in his second year. He then spent nine years on the staff at Concordia College (Minn.), helping the team post a record of 62-28 and 48-24 in the Minnesota Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (MIAC).

As a Prairie Fire player, Willits earned

All-Midwest Conference honors in his senior year when he rushed for 648 yards in only eight games. He was voted the team’s Most Valuable Offensive Player in 2007. He rushed the ball 377 times for 1,626 yards in his college career (12th all-time at Knox), caught 18 passes for 119 yards and scored 11 touchdowns.

A national search for Willits’ replacement will begin immediately.

Important details

- Aaron Willits has resigned as head coach of the Knox College football team after five seasons.
 - Willits cited personal reasons for his decision, including a professional change for his wife.
 - A national search for Willits’ replacement will begin immediately.
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